
MORE THAN A PETITION



At the present time the Development and Peace organisation is circulating a petition asking that the debt owed by the poor countries of this world be cancelled or at least reduced, as a gesture of the new millennium. The Canadian bishops support such an initiative which is taking place not only here but in some 60 other countries as well. Next spring, the signatures, an expression of the will of the people, will be presented to the leaders of the Group of 8 (G-8) at their 1999 Summit taking place in Cologne, Germany.

BIBLICAL ROOTS

This vast international undertaking known as the *Jubilee Year 2000 Campaign* assembles a great number of both religious and non-governmental organisations. The very name of the campaign (Campaign of the Jubilee Year 2000) calls to mind a biblical tradition and the conviction that a new millennium offers an extraordinary occasion to rekindle the hope of the world's poor. If the biblical jubilee year was to be experienced with thanksgiving, it had to have four main components: the forgiveness of offenses, the liberation of slaves, the forgiveness of debts, and leaving some portion of the land fallow. In a document published by the Canadian Ecumenical Initiative for the Jubilee, *Celebrating the Jubilee, Renewing the World*, these themes are studied and presented in a simple manner.

INSPIRING WORDS

Pope John Paul II is an enthusiastic supporter of this measure. *"Christians will have to be the voice of all the poor in proposing that the jubilee be a favourable time to think about an important reduction if not an outright forgiveness of the international debt that weighs so heavily on the fate of numerous countries."* And the Pope came back several times to this topic. At the different synods that took place in Rome recently, this demand was made over and over again. Arrears in bilateral and multilateral debts accumulated by the fifty greatest debt-ridden countries in the world must be cancelled, since these countries are constantly strangled by the interest to be paid, to the detriment of essential services they need to give their people in the fields of education and health care. According to authoritative statistics, between 1982 and 1990 the countries of the South paid out 1345 billion dollars in principal and interest, while the flow from North to South was only 927 billion dollars. The countries in debt actually reimburse their loans at the rate of 3 billion dollars a week, and this rate has not changed in ten years. Even sub-Saharan Africa is forced to pay out one billion dollars per month in reimbursements. Is such a situation acceptable? Several of these countries will no longer be able to pay off their debts, and they have now paid more interest than the capital they borrowed.

INTERNATIONAL DEBT

The international debt is both a complex political question and a moral challenge; it is a serious obstacle to human development; it forces many debt-ridden countries to deploy their major resources to paying off these arrears rather than using them for the welfare of their people. This debt is a challenge inasmuch as it affects human dignity, human rights and the welfare of the most vulnerable in the world family. The Church believes that the debt

is now a factor in the eroding of the international common good, and it calls on governments and institutions to actively engage in finding solutions which would guarantee human dignity, preserve human rights, and serve international commonweal.

A RENEWED LEADERSHIP

Besides seeking the cancellation of debts that cannot be acquitted - as Canada did in the past regarding certain African countries - the petition signatories ask that the G-8 leaders take concrete measures to prevent a new accumulation of debts. If we want to achieve stable economic and social development, we must avoid associating the debts to programmes dictated by the International Monetary Fund: creditor and debtor countries must find real avenues of mutuality and solidarity. The programmes advocated by Development and Peace promote true partnership where people at the grassroots can employ measures best suited to them.

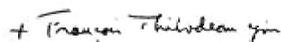
THE INDEBTED IN OUR COUNTRY

It seems to me that research should be undertaken and initiatives taken so that as the year 2000 approaches we not only consider the debt-ridden countries but that we also direct our sense of justice, compassion, and solidarity toward the poor and destitute in our own milieux, so that they, too, have the chance to start the new millennium fittingly. Young people coming out of school with a crushing financial debt come to mind; I am also thinking of families practically enslaved to certain finance companies, as well as those who are sick or bereaved... How do we bring them hope, at the dawn of the year 2000?

NAZARETH, YEAR 30

In the early 30s of our era, *Jesus came to Nazareth where he had been brought up, went to the synagogue... and stood up to read... The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."* I urge you to read and meditate this text from St. Luke, chapter 4 (Cf. verses 16-19). According to his unfathomable project, Jesus associates us intimately to this great jubilee mission: throughout his life he strove to liberate people, both for the glory of God and our greatest good.

Have a good week!



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